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A "LITTLE BOOK OF SAMPLES":
EVIDENCE OF TEXTILES TRADED TO THE AMERICAN INDIANS

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The original inhabitants of the United States were hunters and farmers, who used the produce of the hunt and of their gardens for food, clothing and shelter, for ritual purposes and pleasure. While some textiles were produced by Indians before the arrival of Europeans, the colorful yardgoods, blankets, kerchiefs, ribbons, and tapes introduced by the Europeans quickly became popular items of trade.

As early as 1685 wool fabrics such as matchcoat (a cloak material), stroudwaters, blankets, and stocking were listed among goods traded by William Penn's agents for lands west of the Delaware River. Two years earlier in a similar transaction, coats, shirts, and duffel yardage were also listed.¹ Calico--printed cotton--was used for 18th-century garments, judging by a documented woman's shirt in the Museum of the American Indian. Portraits of important chiefs and invoices of goods ordered for the Indian trade also attest to calico's popularity during the 19th century, as well.

Pictorial and written evidence of trade in the plaid, striped, and solid-colored cottons, that are the subject of this paper, is much more difficult to find. While mentioned occasionally on 19th-century traders' invoices and in official papers of the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, these less colorful utilitarian fabrics are not as obvious among extant artifacts or in the iconography of the time. These facts, affirming the rarity of such material, gave us cause to celebrate when a little leather-bound book containing 50 samples of Indian trade goods arrived in the Division of Textiles last year.²

The goals of this research have been to learn as much as possible about the origin of the book and its samples, and to discover how such fabrics might have been acquired and used by Indians living within trading distance of Fort Gibson, Oklahoma, where the materials were assembled. To date not all these goals have been met; this report should be considered work in progress.

THE SAMPLE BOOK

The handwritten inscription on the sample book's cover indicates that it accompanied a report generated by the Commissioners of Indians of the Western Superintendency. According to the inscription, it was sent to Lewis Cass, Secretary of War, to whom the commissioners were accountable. A note written on page one, dated Fort Gibson March 4, 1834, and signed by Commissioner Henry L. Ellsworth, explains the book's contents:

The annexed samples were cut from large sample[s] & promised at the manufacturers in the East--These prices are fixed by the manufacturers themselves--A sutler at this post Mr West has kindly given the prices as sold at this garrison. In the interior they are much higher.

The sutler, William O. West, whose official duty was to sell provisions to the soldiers, wrote a letter to Ellsworth two days later certifying that he had, indeed, selected the "samples of Domestics" and pasted them in the "small Russett Book." He also provided a few more details:

"I hereby certify I examined several samples of home manufactured cloth [and] . . . annexed to them . . . the price of the article as I found them originally marked and also the price at which such goods are sold to Indians resident in this vicinity. I am well acquainted with such goods . . . , which are sold in great quantities by sutlers at this Post to Indians. The sale price [sic] marked in [the] Russett book are about the usual tariff rates for such goods at this post."³

WHY THE SAMPLES WERE ASSEMBLED

Circumstantial evidence suggests that the book was connected to a report dated February 20, 1834, submitted by the three commissioners to the Committee on Indian Affairs of the 23rd Congress.⁴ The book, with its 50 samples, each marked with the manufacturer's price and the selling price for Indians, would have offered dramatic evidence to support a bill being introduced into Congress, concerning the regulation of trade with the Indians. The Commissioners' report stated flatly:

. . . the evils attending the present regulation of trade deserve particular attention [After] the old factory system was abandoned, . . . licences [were] granted to individual [traders], . . . [It was hoped] that competition would guard against extortion, while private capital saved a public loss. Has the remedy equalled the expectations of the Government? Are the Indians fairly supplied? Are they protected from fraud and imposition? These are interesting questions: an examination of Indian trade . . . will convince Government that much . . . remains to be done⁵

Preparatory to generating the report, Ellsworth surveyed several Indian Agencies to learn about their trade practices and prices. His letter to William P. May of the Shawnee Agency was probably typical of those he sent to other agents. Ellsworth said, in part,

I am anxious to ascertain as far as practicable the price paid by the Indians for their goods, and the manner in which they obtain them. . . . I should be glad to hear . . . any suggestions calculated to meliorate the conditions of the aboriginees [sic].⁶

The final report was based on the agents' replies, as well as on the commissioners' observations and experiences, gleaned during almost a year spent on the frontier traveling, resolving problems, and participating in treaty negotiations.

The report explained why traders' activities needed regulating. Among other comments incorporated into it, were those of Indian Agent John S. Bean, written at Fort Leavenworth on November 6th 1833:

There being no regular government in the Indian trade to state precisely the per cent that they are made to pay, . . . [the prices charged the Indians are] much greater than [those] required of the

white man--[They depend on the Indians' need] for the articles, . . . [The Indians then] are forced to give what is demanded of them . . . [As to] prices . . . the traders take [for] peltries . . . there are no regular prices--Exchange is made between the Indian and trader-- . . . In that commerce the prices are all fixed by the traders . . .⁷

Another way that unscrupulous traders could take advantage of Indians was by preying upon their annuities. When the U. S. Government made a treaty with an Indian tribe it usually agreed, as its part of the bargain, to give the tribe an annuity, a specified sum of money, to be collected annually, in the form of cash or goods--whichever the tribe preferred--in exchange for some concession that the Indian agreed to.

According to the commissioners' report, many Indian traders⁸ urged their customers to take their annuities in cash, instead of in kind. That way the Indians could buy traders' (high-priced) wares, and when cash ran out, they could buy additional goods on credit. This arrangement frequently forced the Indians into debts that could only be repaid with pelts. Having no other choice, their over-hunting reduced even further the supply of increasingly scarce fur-bearing animals, especially in the territory west of the Mississippi River.

This system was illustrated by the strategy of Col. Auguste P. Chouteau who ran a successful trading operation with the northern Osage tribe. Chouteau advanced the Indians' supplies at a high rate of interest which they paid in what were called "hairy bank notes." When in 1826 Chouteau observed that game was dwindling in his (Three Forks) region, he himself stated in a letter that he was now "calculat[ing] more on the annuities of the different tribes than on the furs."⁹

The advantage to the Indians of receiving annuities in goods, rather than in cash, was verified by Major Francis W. Armstrong, Agent of one of the Choctaw tribes. He noted that for \$619 paid by the government for domestics--cloths of American manufacture--at New Orleans, each of 537 Indians could receive about 8 to 12 yards of cloth, depending on the yardage's original cost. If paid in cash, with which the Indians would buy similar goods from traders in the interior, each Indian would get only about 2-3/4 to 3 yards of cloth.¹⁰

THE SAMPLES

The reason for selecting this group of cloths to sample is puzzling, since the literature and extant pictorial evidence suggests that Indians favored calicoes over woven plaids, checks, and stripes. Ellsworth's interest in domestic manufactures might have influenced the selection.

In 1832 he had supervised the U. S. Treasury Department's survey of manufactures for his home state of Connecticut. In a report to the Secretary of Treasury, he suggested that a "repository of samples of domestic articles of manufacture" be set up in Washington, so manufacturers could display their wares, dealers could order them, and foreigners could see our "progress in the arts, the sources of our wealth, and the success of our independence." Ellsworth also mentioned that he was collecting samples of Connecticut manufacture that he would forward, along with the survey returns.¹¹ This reveals his belief that a display

of samples had persuasive powers.

The book itself does not reveal precisely where and by whom the samples were produced. The only clue it offers is a reference on the first page to "manufacturers in the East;" to date no document has been turned up in the National Archives that provides more specific information. There is little doubt, however, that the cloths were manufactured in some of the hundreds of cotton factories in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, Pennsylvania, or even New Jersey. Such coarse cottons, listed collectively as "domestics" on merchants' invoices, were, in the 1830s, produced in almost every cotton mill in the East, with the bulk coming from New England. Although "domestics" suggests home woven products, that expression, by the 1830s, referred almost exclusively to coarse cottons power woven in the United States.

The British had been--and continued to be--America's most active foreign supplier of cottons throughout the 19th century. They could not, however, compete with our own production in this class of textile. The greater mechanization of American mills, a highly skilled labor force, and the relatively low price of raw cotton, which was grown and processed in the south, made the cost of domestics low enough to open up markets for them from the expanding American frontier to as distant a destination as South America.

The 50 samples in the book are represented by 11 different fabric names. 23 are solid colors: a chambray, a cotton wool cloth, a Mexican, a heavy negro cotton, 4 shirtings, and 15 drills, sometimes called drilling. 21 are stripes: 3 of these are granduriles; 9 are labelled fancy stripe or sup[er]ior indigo stripe; and the other 9 stripes are jeans, only 2 of which are labelled striped jeans. The smallest group is plaid: one of these is called furniture and the other 5, fancy plaid.

With one exception, the fabrics are 100% cotton. The exception is cotton wool cloth, with cotton yarns in one direction, and wool in the other. Because it lacks a selvage we can only assume that its finer, denser-set, vertically-oriented cotton yarns make up the warp, and its looser-packed horizontal wool yarns are weft. This sample measures about 1/2" to 3/4" by 2-1/2".

Only a few of the samples bear unfamiliar names: the term Negro cotton, for example, has not been found in any source to date. It may or may not be interchangeable with Negro cloth, a term that has been variously defined as a wool/cotton combination, or a coarse all-cotton fabric, mainly sold in the late 19th century south for wear by field hands, and earlier, for slaves.

Grandurile was a puzzler. At first it was not clear if it was spelled "grandurile" or "grandusile." A clue to its spelling, however, was suggested by the Fairchild Dictionary of Textiles' definition of grandrelle yarn: "A two-ply yarn made of singles, one a roving twist thread of two colors, the other either a different color or repeating one color of the roving twist thread. . . ." Grandrelle was defined as "a coarse English shirting made with grandrelle yarns in a 5-harness warp satin weave, generally with colored warp stripes." The 3 plain-woven

grandurile samples all include warp stripes of grandrelle yarns, in which blue and white strands are twisted together to form single yarns.

The term furniture referred to a checked cotton. This type of fabric had been used commonly for bed covers and hangings into the 19th century. The name "furniture" was applied to all the bed's decorative textiles, as well as the bed itself. The terms drill and drilling were used interchangeably. Both terms were applied to a coarse cotton twill.

Mexican cloth, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is "a silk and wool French goods;" according to Dorothy Burnham, it is a "specialized French fabric term that refers to a warp-figured silk."¹² Clearly, our version is neither of the above, but a plain-woven cotton that is related to grandurile, except that its all-over mottled effect is created by the grandrelle yarns used for the entire weft.

Most patterned samples average about 1-1/4" x 3-1/4"; the solid-colored pieces are somewhat smaller. Although shades vary, colors are limited to 10 basics: white, off-white, grey, tan, 3 shades each of blue and brown, and mixed blue and white grandrelle yarns. Original fabric widths range from 23" for colored drillings to 37-1/2" for one of the shirtings; most are 25" to 28" wide.

The U. S. Treasury survey of 1832 was used as the basis for comparing manufacturers' prices to those of the Fort Gibson samples. As one might suspect, in shirtings and stripes, the two main categories for which survey prices were available, the Fort Gibson samples fitted into the low or medium price range. The samples' prices reveal markups ranging from 180% for the least expensive shirting, to 42.8% for cotton wool cloth, the highest-priced fabric. The 10 fabrics with markups of less than 100% include white drill, the 3 granduriles, Mexican, 4 of the jeans, and the cotton wool. 17, including fancy stripes and plaids, the furniture, the chambray, and indigo stripes, were marked up exactly 100%, and the remaining 23 cloths, that included most of the solid colors, had markups over 100%.

While these figures present a case for the opinion that markups on Indian trade goods were high, further study on pricing practices of the period is called for. It also should be noted that the cost of shipping goods from the east coast to Fort Gibson and other frontier outposts was high. Besides the manufacturer's selling price and the merchant's cut, the complexity of transport and the financial and physical risks involved, all added to the goods' selling price. Although steamboats had been making regular runs along the Arkansas River to Fort Gibson since 1825, the flow of river traffic was far from routine. The "boating season" was November to July, due to variations in the water level; also, in certain parts of the Missouri and other rivers, vessels encountered obstacles, such as fallen trees and other vegetation, that could impede travel. When the Arkansas River was not navigable as far as Fort Gibson, merchandise had to be forwarded to the Missouri and Osage Rivers, then transported overland by pack trains or wagons to their final destination.

HOW THE FABRICS WERE USED

The U. S. Government's "Removal" of southeastern Indian tribes to

territory west of the Mississippi River following passage of the Removal Act of 1830, brought the Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Seminoles to the region around Fort Gibson, where the Osages, Quapaws, and Comanches were already settled. In the course of this "removal," Indians engaged in agriculture on lands they had occupied before the arrival of white settlers, were forced to move west to frontier territory that was unoccupied, or sparsely occupied, by whites.

This exchange was deemed fair by the Congress, for it promoted Indians' welfare by isolating them from evils brought about by contact with white men, and provided them with extensive lands for the pursuit of agriculture. Aside from the tragic results this displacement had for thousands of Native Americans, it opened up new trading opportunities west of the Mississippi with some Indian peoples, like the Creeks and Seminoles, who, since their earliest contact with Europeans, had incorporated large quantities of cloths into their dress.

Although calico was the cotton most often used for Indian garb and accessories, smaller-size shawls--most likely those of printed cotton--were commonly used by Creek and Seminole men, wrapped, turban-fashion, around the head. Also, larger, patterned square shawls were worn by Indian women, draped over their shoulders.

Solid-colored cottons were obvious choices for shirts and other garments, accessories, and trimmings. Many portraits by photographers who travelled south and west of the Mississippi during the second half of the 19th century do show checks, plaids, and stripes worn in various ways by Indian men and women. We do not find many, however, in painted portraits of the 1830s, and these cloths are even more difficult to find in museum collections.

A number of Charles Bird King's 1820s and '30s portraits of important chiefs and warriors, show their sitters wearing coats or shirts of stripes or checks. Reproductions of these, based on King's originals, appeared in the three-volume work, The Indian Tribes of North America, whose first volume was published in 1836.¹³

While considering it a "given" that it is impossible to identify the fiber content or weave of a cloth positively from a painting, these works, along with those created by George Catlin, Karl Bodmer, Henry Inman, and others suggest how Creek, Yuchi, and Seminole men might have used striped and checked fabrics. Artists who rendered subjects wearing such cloths often painted them in colors more vibrant than the 10 basic blues, browns, tans, and greys found in the samples. Artistic license was, no doubt, often taken to "improve" dull reality.

A limited number of checks, plaids, or stripes have been found among Indian materials in the few museum collections examined to date.¹⁴ While some of those items are believed to have originated early in the 19th century, none can be dated positively. No complete garments made of these types of cottons have been found.

Most stripes, checks, and plaids found, line the straps of bandolier bags; a few line the bag's triangular flap. They sometimes served as the

lining of one part, with calico used to line another part of the same bag. The visible outer portions of these bags were usually made of stroud. Decoration consisted of elaborate beaded designs, with edges finished with contrasting colored silk ribbon; tasseled fringe often trimmed the lower edge. Most of these bags, that dated from the first half of the 19th century, were of Seminole or Creek origin.

One blue and white check was found attached, in a narrow foot-long strip, to either side of the front opening of a cotton coat, that had probably been worn by a Seminole man. The coat itself is calico, decorated with the usual serrated appliqué trim. The remainder of the checked and plaid cottons found served either as the outer or inner wrapping of medicine bundles. They came from various tribes and most are not dated. One red and white stripe was found among the inner wrappings of an especially interesting Eastern Sioux Tree Dweller's bundle, that also included a painted carved wooden doll within its layers of cloth. Kickapoo and Potawatomi medicine bundles exhibited in the American Museum of Natural History also include calico and striped cloths among their wrappings; and one Pawnee "skull bundle" there includes individual packets of paint, neatly tied within blue and white striped cotton wrappers.

Many brightly colored plain cottons were used as serrated-appliqué trim on Creek and Seminole men's and women's shirts and leggings, men's coats, and women's dresses. Coarse plain white cloths were also used as linings for a wide variety of garments, such as coats and leggings.

Although I have not yet located any pre-1850 men's coats and shirts, or women's skirts, blouses, and dresses made of plaids, checks, and stripes, Dr. William Sturtevant of the Smithsonian's Department of Anthropology has assured me that some can, indeed, be found. The evidence for them is in the Charles Bird King portraits that we have seen, as well as in the sutler William O. West's comments about the quantity of such fabrics sold to the Indians. Because a continuing search will, no doubt, turn up such material, we consider the investigation ongoing at this time.

NOTES

1. "Pennsylvania Trade Goods 1683-1685." The Museum of the Fur Trade Quarterly 20, 4 (Winter 1984):14 (from Pennsylvania Archives, 1 (Philadelphia 1852):95.
2. The transfer of this book from the National Archives to the National Museum of American History was arranged by Donald Kloster, a curator in the Division of Armed Forces History. Subsequently he had it transferred to the Division of Textiles.
3. W[illiam] O. West to Henry L. Ellsworth, March 6, 1834, Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, Western Superintendency, 1832-1851, RG 75, U. S. National Archives.
4. Ellsworth, Henry L., Montfort Stokes, and John F. Schermerhorn. "Report of the Commissioners of Indian Affairs, West, dated Fort Gibson, February 10, 1834." House Report (No. 474, 23rd Congress, 1st Session, May 20, 1834):78-103.

5. Ibid, p. 95.

6. Op. cit., U. S. National Archives, August 14th 1833.

7. Op. cit., U. S. National Archives.

8. When the U. S. Government made treaties with Indian tribes it usually agreed, as its part of the bargain, to give the tribe an "annuity," a specified sum of money, to be collected annually, in the form of cash or goods, whichever the individual tribe preferred. The annuity was a basic element in the government's dealings with the Indians. As Montfort Stokes, one of the Indian Commissioners, wrote to the Secretary of War in 1833, "I wish to bring all the Indians between the Mississippi and the Rocky mountains under some kind of controul [sic] or influence of the Government. This can only be done by annuities or presents. If we do not want their land, still an annual present will teach them to listen to their great Father as a friend interested in their welfare. We know, Sir, that the United States have promised protection and security to the emigrating Tribes. How is this promise to be fulfilled? The Camanches and Pawnees are the Arabs of the Prairies, living sometimes in the United States and sometimes in Texas. To threaten these people with war: They would laugh at it -- Where can you find them? They regularly follow the herds of Buffalos. The only way to have an influence is to call them in annually to some of our Military Posts to receive an annuity or a suitable present. Whenever Indians receive a gratuity from Government, no matter in what shape, they immediately evince a respect for that Government. . . ." (Op. cit., National Archives, August 15, 1833)

9. Morris, Wayne. 1970. "Auguste Pierre Chouteau, Merchant Prince at the Three Forks of the Arkansas." The Chronicles of Oklahoma 48, 2:155-163.

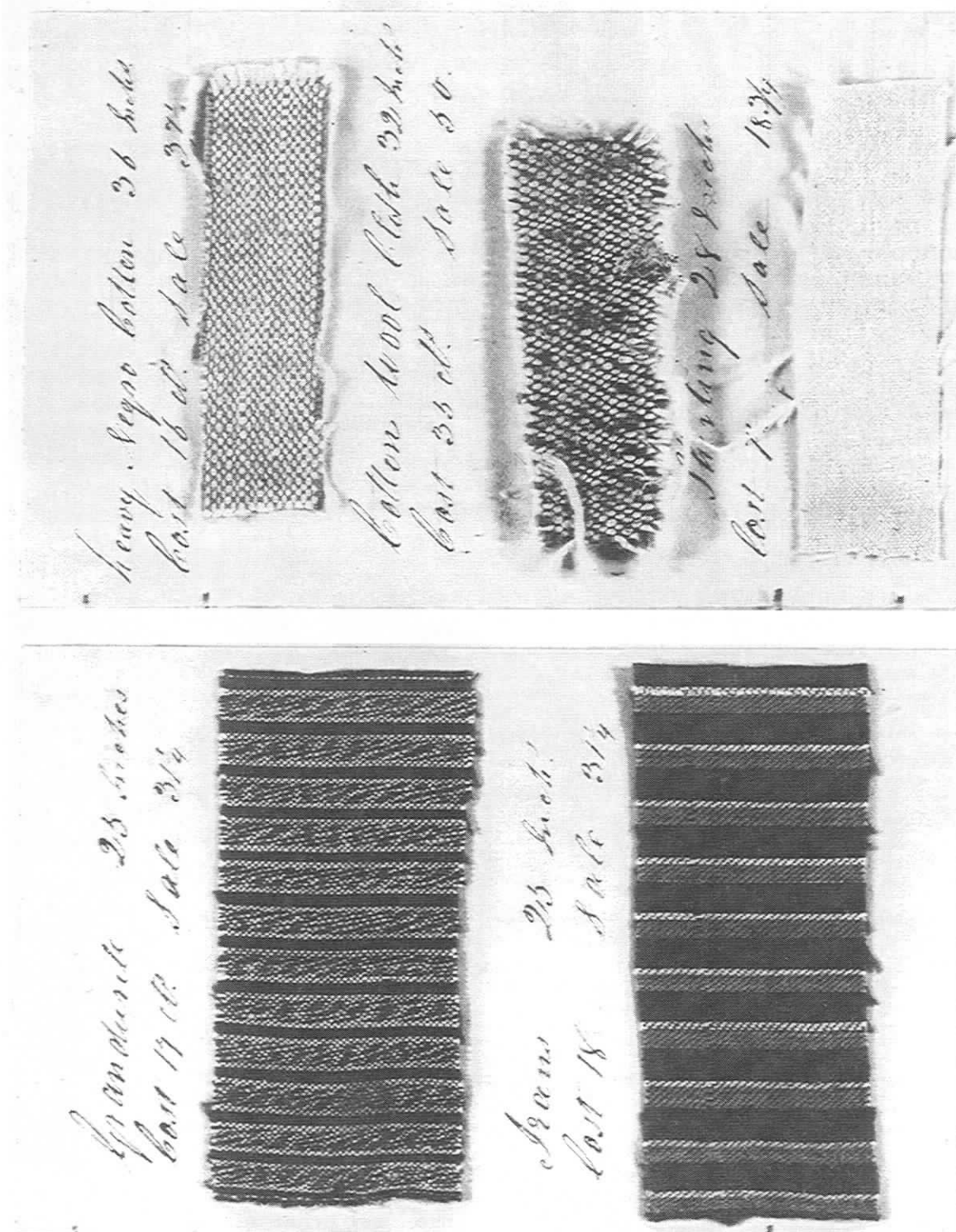
10. Op.cit., U. S. National Archives, Extract from Armstrong's Report.

11. Ellsworth, H. L. "Returns from the State of Connecticut." The New American State Papers, "Manufactures" Vol. 5:307 (Reprint 1972, Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Inc.).

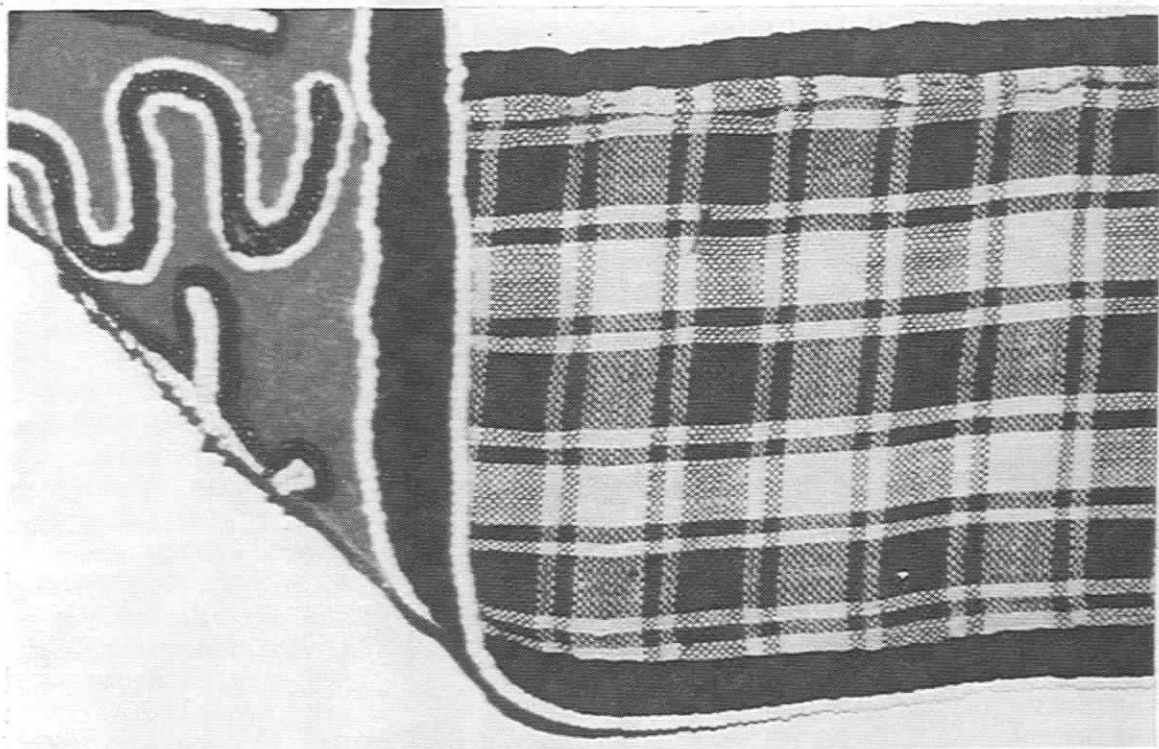
12. Burnham, Dorothy K. 1980. Warp & Weft. A Dictionary of Textile Terms. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

13. McKenney, Thomas L. and James Hall 1836-1844 History of the Indian Tribes of North America . . . (Reprint Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1972).

14. Exhibited American Indian materials were surveyed in the American Museum of Natural History and in the Museum of the American Indian; a group of materials from the latter museum's reference collections, deemed relevant to this research were selected by Gary Galante, a curator of that collection. He also suggested that I examine several items in the Montclair Art Museum's collection, that he featured in his article, "Creek Man's Outfit in the Collection of The Montclair Art Museum" (The Rand Society for Native American Art 1989, 1,1:1-4).



Sample book, actual size. Left, page 17: Grandurile and Jeans. Right, page 31: Heavy Negro Cotton, Cotton Wool Cloth, and Shirting.



Left, 1834 portrait of Sam Perryman, a Creek, by George Catlin, who described him as "mostly clad in calicoes, and other cloths of civilized manufacture." National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Right, Bandolier bag with blue and white checked cotton strap lining. Probably Creek, ca 1800. Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, NJ.